Characters

The Film Club

(A Monologue by Suzanne Alexander)

Act

SUZANNE ALEXANDER

Often when I'm despondent, I watch Bette Davis's movies. Yesterday I started to make a list of them. While I wrote I found myself remembering when my husband, David, was detained in West Africa the winter of 1961. He was missing for fifteen months. Often evenings in Accra David read to me about methods of torture during imprisonment. It was from Fanon:

" *The brutal methods which are directed toward getting prisoners to speak rather than to actual torture. There is a mass attack...*"

In that winter of 1961, David's and my life changed. As did Alice's, my sister-in-law's.

Alice and 1 waited for David in London. I had flown from Accra, she from Washington. We expected David to arrive in London in a week.

I looked at one of Alice's movies today. In remembrance. I call them Alice's movies because it was Alice who formed our film club, in 1959, typed our scripts, directed, and filmed scenes with all of us playing parts. She chose Bette Davis movies. And "adapted" them. She referred to them as "my films." She even sent one to Kazan.

That was also the summer we went to Birdland. Dizzy was there. I'm sure you know Alice Alexander's poetry and her collections of slave narratives. She died last week of an asthmatic attack in Washington, D˙C˙

In 1961 we were staying in a room in London at 9 Bolton Gardens, waiting. We had no word from David. I became so distraught that one

night I tried to climb into the closed garden to sleep. I developed ailments, nausea, breathiessness. My doctor tried to involve Alice and me in a theatrical reading he was working on with patients. They were doing excerpts from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. My doctor's name was Freudenberger. He said, "The readings will distract you while you are waiting for your husband."

I read the role of Lucy and Alice read Mina. The doctor lived in the Little Boitons in a dark, damp dwelling. We didn't know it but David was in trouble. Alice filmed our readings as well as us walking on Old Brompton Road.

David and I have written several poems together. We record together and perhaps some of you have seen my most famous play, *She Talks to Beethoven*, a play set in Ghana during David's first disappearance. I also teach the essays of Alice Walker, the poetry of Borges, Lorca, Ishmael Reed, and the plays of Wole Soyinka. Students at New York University are doing an early play of mine. The first line is: "Everyone is reading *Catcher in the Rye*."

In those early days Alice often told me plots of Bette Davis movies. She knew them by heart, as well as the stories of Davis's life. She'd say: In 1930 Bette Davis stepped off a transcontinental train in Hollywood with a six-month contract in hand, a dream of stardom in her head... dreams that soon began to fade.

She'd read from a book she'd bought at Marboros. She'd say: "Kate Bosworth, a young artist, meets a handsome lighthouse inspector, Bill (Glenn Ford), while spending the summer on Marthas Vineyard as the houseguest of her guardian, Mr˙ Lindley (Charles Ruggles). Kate believes she is in love with Bill and he with her when her identical twin sister, Patricia, shows up and becomes enchanted by Bill.

Patricia and Bill marry. Determined to forget her painting and studies with a cruel but brilliant artist, Kate hears that Bill and Patricia will leave for Chile to live. She decides to give up studying and retreat to the Vineyard house. When she returns to the Vineyard, she discovers Patricia did not go with Bill...

... For a while Kate pretends to be her twin, Patricia, hoping to gain Bill's love. But one day she decides she cannot go on. And for the final time returns to the Vineyard. But Bill follows Kate to the Island, knowing now she is the sister he should have married..."

That winter of 1961 every day we went to the American Embassy for word of David After we left the Embassy we'd go to Windsor in the rain. Queen Victoria had grieved for Albert there. My husband, where was he? Alice clutched her *Blue Guide* and we went to see the Roman. wall in the City.

I remembered in our garden in Accra how David read me the love poems of Senghor.

Now I was expecting our child, Rachel.

Evenings in Accra David had often told me of soldiers who were prisoners. Generally speaking they had a noise phobia and a thirst for peace and affection. Their disorders took various forms, as states of agitation, rages, immobility, many attempted suicides, tears, lamentations, and appeals for mercy.

Alice continued to write David at the American Embassy in Ghana. Bur we didn't know where he was. She wrote:

"Suzanne wants to return to Africa and search for you. The doctor says she cannot travel back to West Africa. It might kill the baby."

In the rain we take the 30 bus down Old Brompton Road, past the South Kensington station, take another bus and walk into the Haymarket and wait for letters at American Express. And in the afternoon again we go to Windsor.

Suzanne is drawn to the painting of the tiny, sad figure of Victoria dressed in black mourning her husband's death. We walk in Windsor Park until it is dark and we have to take the train back to London. Suzanne's doctor phones. His theatrical group is waiting for us. We read from Stoker:

'*... All at once the wolves began to howl as though the moonlight had had some peculiar effect on them. The hones jumped about and reared and looked helplessly round with eyes that rolled in a way painful to see; but the living ring of terror encompassed them on every side*--'

Dr˙ Freudenberger gave me the part of Lucy. These readings were for our amusement and I don't think the others realized how strongly I was affected by the passages I read on Lucy.

I began to utter them in my sleep.

Lucy sleepwalks to the
suicide seat on the East
cliff.

Dracula, drinks her blood
for the first time.
She receives a blood
transfusion.
The wolf Berserker escapes
from the zoo, breaks
a window providing
Dracula with passage to
Lucy
again.
Lucy dies.
She is buried in a church
yard near Hampstead
Heath.

Dr˙ Freuderiberger sat behind his desk as we read. His nervous German wife, Heike, served tea, sat aside, and studied *Steppenwolf*.

Alice wrote David:

"On the Thames going to Greenwich Suzanne recites one of your favorite poems from Diop. She carries notebooks of your records of slave ships, slave quarters, slaves crouching below the stern on the ship. My husband, she told a stranger, gives lectures on slave ships crossing the Atlantic. We reach Greenwich and see the place where Elizabeth I was born.

"She recites Diop as we cross the grounds up to the observatory. Her breathlessness is worse. And my asthma is bad. Yet she quotes the poem:

The Vultures
Way back then with their civilizing edicts
with their holy water
splashing on domesticated brows
the vultures in the shadows
of their claws were setting up
the bloody monument of the
guardian era
way back then
laughter gasped its last...

"Suzanne must leave London, Dr˙ Freudenberger says, by the beginning of March. Often nauseated, she is in the Haymarket at American Express mornings when the offices are still closed. She doesn't want to leave Europe without word of you. Afternoons she sits by the gas fire and cries. ‘Do you trust Dr˙F˙?’she asks.

"Freudenberger walks us back from the reading along the dark curved street to No˙ 9, staring at Suzanne.

"In three nights we plan to leave London. Our theatrical group reads sequences that Freudenberger loves.

Jonathan Harker arriving
at Klausenberg stays the
night, leaves by coach for
Castle Dracula...
realizes he is a prisoner,

watches Dracula crawl
face down over the castle
wall...
enters the forbidden
room...
Dracula makes Harker
write three misleading
letters to England...
Harker discovers his
personal effects are gone...
Dracula leaves the castle
dressed in Harkers
clothes and returns with a
child for the three
vampire women...
the bereft mother is killed
by wolves...
Harker climbs along the
castle wall to the cellar
where he finds Dracula in
a box.

"These sequences we read sitting in a circle. Sometimes it makes Suzanne cry. We have to leave London with no word from you. Our

last day we sailed again on the Thames to Greenwich, returned and went to a movie in Leicester Square."

In three weeks we knew David had disappeared. I went back to Washington and lived with his family, our daughter, Rachel, was born. David's family says I lapsed into sleeplessness, hysteria. I began to exhibit signs of the prisoners David had described to me, states of agitation, rages, immobility, tears, attempted suicides, lamentations, appeals for mercy.

We heard from the Ghanaian Embassy there was a doctor in Algeria who had once tried to kill Fanon. And this Sottan was behind the plot against my husband. We later learned this Sottan has us followed through the villages in Africa. We remembered an incident at our cottage behind the Ambassador Hotel, a man who said he was the gardener. And earlier on our voyage on the *Elizabeth* there had been a man in the ship's orchestra who had befriended us.

On the last morning in London Dr˙ Freudenberger and Alice found me wandering along the Embankment near More's Gardens. I thought we were at one of our readings and began to cry the words of Stoker:

" *When I saw again the*
driver was climbing into
the calèche and the
wolves had disappeared,
this was all so strange
and uncanny that a
dreadful fear came upon
me and I was afraid to
speak or move. The time
seemed interminable as

we swept on our way
now in almost complete
darkness..."

My husband, where is he?

Alice wrote that I was delirious and had started to speak of branches of trees cracking together wild roses, mountain ash, lines from Stoker. It was after the birth of our daughter, Rachel.

We read in the *Washington Post:*

" *It is believed that Professor David Alexander, a native of Washington and a graduate of Ohio State University, was taken to dinner by a Swiss journalist in Geneva last winter, a journalist who was working for the French Secret Service. Alexander, who worked with Fanon, had been trying to uncover a plot against the revolutionary writer's life. During the dinner observers say Alexander became violently ill after having an aperitif and was admitted to the hospital*.

Nothing more is known but it is suspected he was poisoned with filicin. His family has been unable to determine his whereabouts.

As you may recall, Fanon died here in Washington last year.

The Alexanders of 16th Street, N˙ W˙ here in the city have endured great sorrow this year. Two months ago the baby daughter, Rachel, of Alexander and his wife, Suzanne, was involved in an accidental death. Circumstances are not known."

After David returned sometimes we walked at night in Rock Creek Park, I reread *Wretched of the Earth* to try to understand what you had been through. Your symptoms:

idiopathic tremors
hair turning white
paroxysmal tachycardias
muscular stiffness
anxiety and feeling of imminent death
heavy sweating fits.

We never got to see Frantz. Alice and I went to the hospital in Washington where we thought he was. "We were not admitted.

I still read from his life and search for the cause of his illnesses and death.

My romantic sister-in-law, up until her death we all lived on 16th Street. I see her writing scripts, arranging us all for the camera.

We never had a film club again. After David's imprisonment Alice didn't make films much.

Several years ago at Thanksgiving we looked for Alices favorite scene of *Now Voyager*; it was missing. She believed she lost it that winter in London.

I continue to read long passages from Fanon, but for now a brief segment:

" *But the war goes on:*

and we will have to bind up for years to come the many sometimes ineffaceable wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people."

END